

# Tall Traffic Tales

*Some say congestion is getting worse in Riverside, but it's all relative.*

By Alastair Goldfisher

**It's fitting that** Fleetwood Enterprises, the nation's largest manufacturer of recreational vehicles, is based in Riverside. Because at the rate homes and businesses are growing in California's 11th largest city, locals are going to want to live in their cars just so they can avoid the clogged streets.

That's the pessimist's viewpoint.

Optimists, like Eric Haley, say that traffic congestion is rampant throughout California, but Riverside is not all that bad in comparison.

"We have become more congested, no doubt about it," says Haley, executive director of the Riverside County Transportation Commission. "But if you live and work in the Riverside area and you must rely on logistics, the movement of goods, or manufacturing, then the transportation system is ideal for you."

Part of Haley's enthusiasm stems from Metrolink, a Southern California rail system that has connected Riverside to Los Angeles and Orange counties for nearly 10 years. Ridership is relatively low – Haley says it averages about 32,000 riders a month. And riders have been upset in recent months about trains running late because Metrolink operates on the same Union Pacific tracks as freight trains.

But Haley says Metrolink has become a focus for the transportation commission in 2002. And he points to improvements being made at several stations in the Riverside area. Later this year, for example, the commission plans to open a new Metrolink station in downtown Corona that eventually will include 1,000 parking spaces. The issue of parking is being addressed at other stations in Riverside County, as well.

Officials are hoping that demand for parking spaces will rise following the opening this spring of the new Metrolink station in Tustin and the induction of new service in Fullerton, Norwalk, and downtown LA. The opening of the Tustin station is especially important to Riverside residents because of its proximity to job centers in Irvine.

"People in Riverside can get to San Bernardino, Ontario, and other main points in Riverside County easily enough," says Haley. "It's getting to Orange County that's difficult."

Historically, the traffic problem in Riverside has come from people living in Riverside who drive to jobs in Orange and even LA, resulting in one-way commutes of 90 minutes or more. The worst part of that legendary drive from hell is going back and forth over highway 91. The

corridor from Riverside to OC is bordered in stretches by a protected national forest and a state park.

"The auto will never go away, but the 91 isn't going to expand in that corridor, either," says Jeff Lustgarten, spokesman for the Southern California Association of Governments.

Lustgarten suggests that the six counties (Riverside, San Bernardino, Orange, LA, Imperial, and Ventura) work together to improve the efficiency of rail movements and to consider more truck-only lanes to help improve traffic congestion.

He adds that the problem will only get worse in the six-county region as the population grows from 16 million to 22 million by 2025.

"We can't rely on the sprawl mentality any more," Lustgarten says. "That's not what will reduce traffic congestion."

## Riverside growth

Riverside has long had to deal with traffic. According to 1990 figures, which were the most recent available, nearly one of three working residents of Riverside, commuted outside the area.

"The best way to improve traffic is to create more business opportunities in the City of Riverside," says Deputy City Manager Michael Beck. "Over time, that is our best way to reduce congestion."

But Riverside has become a victim of its own success. The area is indeed gaining new businesses, thanks to the efforts of Beck and the economic development agency. Job growth is on the rise, says economist John Husing, who reports that San Bernardino and Riverside counties have added nearly 37,000 new jobs in the last 12 months, compared to LA County, which saw its workforce shrink by more than 20,000 during the same period.

Of course, along with the jobs come new homes. The real estate market in the Riverside area has become hotter than a brush fire. And as new housing projects go up, traffic remains a problem. Anecdotally, many residents have noticed and complained that new develop-

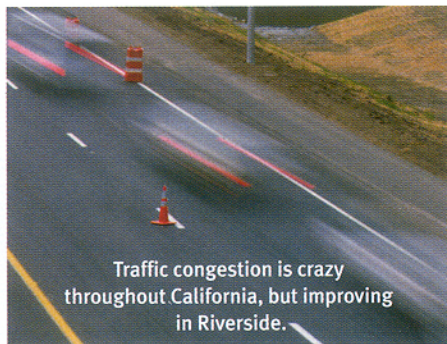
ments in the area south of Riverside are putting more drivers on the road, overwhelming narrow, rural-type stretches and clogging the arteries that connect to the 91.

So, County Supervisor Bob Buster and City Councilman Ed Adkison have formed a committee to discuss the growth issues.

The city doesn't have current traffic counts for the area. But there are nearly 20 housing development projects planned in the county area that could pour as many as 6,100 new cars a day onto McAllister Street, reports Adkison. The streets aren't wide enough and drivers' patience isn't long enough to handle that kind of traffic.

The population and job explosions have made traffic conditions worse in the Riverside area, something that must be fixed, says Holly Kress, spokeswoman with the California Department of Transportation.

Caltrans isn't widening the 91. But the state agency is tackling one of the worst freeway crossings in the area – the cloverleaf interchange that encompasses highways 91, 61, and 215. The interchange, located north of



Traffic congestion is crazy throughout California, but improving in Riverside.

University of California, Riverside, handles some 150,000 cars a day. Reconstruction on the interchange will increase the number of lanes on all three routes. The \$250 million project, paid for by local, state, and federal funds, is set to begin this fall and is slated for completion by 2006.

"If more CEOs relocate to Riverside and more of them set up distribution centers in the area, then we're going to have to rebuild this cloverleaf," says Kress.

"It won't do away with traffic," she says. "But it will help."

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